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David Zaslav, President & CEO, Warner Bros. Discovery speaks during Warner Brothers Pictures CinemaCon 2023 presentation at Caesars Palace on April 25, 2023 in Las Vegas, Nevada. Courtesy of Valerie Macon via Getty Images

Culture

How Warner Bros. Discovery CEO David Zaslav Became Public Enemy Number One in Hollywood

A series of maneuvers from the executive has kept the film community in a state of shock and anger.

By Jason Bailey

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It must have been quite a shock to the captain of industry—standing at the lectern at his alma mater, resplendent in his red-and-black graduation regalia—when he realized the Boston University Class of 2023 was booing him. David Zaslav, president and CEO of Warner Bros. Discovery, was delivering the commencement address, recalling how the late General Electric CEO Jack Welch once told him, “If you want to be successful, you’re going to have to figure out how to get along with everyone—and that includes difficult people.”

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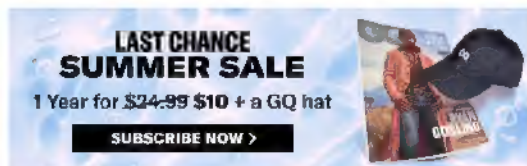


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But instead of listening to his pearls of wisdom, the students were heckling him. Others had turned their backs to the stage. Now more were chanting, “Pay your writers,” as Zaslav, a studio head, was one of the oft-invoked villains of the striking Writers Guild of America.

He tried to press on with his story, continuing to quote Welch: “Some people will be looking for a fight.” The booing continued.

Zaslav later issued a statement thanking BU for the invitation, and insisting, “as I have often said, I am immensely supportive of writers and hope the strike is resolved soon and in a way that they feel recognizes their value.” But he had been humiliated, openly and unapologetically, and while he was duly kowtowed after the fact—BU President Robert Brown publicly apologized for the incident, blaming it on “cancel culture”—he must’ve wondered, somewhere in the back of his mind, how it had come to this.



In a relatively short period of time, David Zaslav has become perhaps the most hated man in Hollywood. Few people who weren’t industry insiders even knew his name two years ago, when Discovery merged with WarnerMedia to become Warner Bros. Discovery. Zaslav had been CEO of Discovery Communications since 2006, where he oversaw the transition from, in his words, “no longer a cable company, (but) a content company.” What that meant, from a viewer’s perspective, was Discovery’s transition from educational programming to reality slop—which is, of course, a much more lucrative business model.

In his (slight) defense, there were considerable challenges awaiting the CEO of the new Warner Bros. Discovery conglomerate, whomever that might have been. Warner Bros. had, like most motion picture studios, struggled considerably during the pandemic. Their decision to simultaneously stream their entire 2021 theatrical slate on the HBOMax streaming service upset other filmmakers, including those whose films were impacted by it (and theatrical chains as well). One example? Christopher Nolan, who’s enormously profitable relationship with WB began back in 2002, was so pissed that he took his new film *Oppenheimer* to Universal out of frustration by the company’s poor handling of his 2020 feature *Tenet*.

In retrospect, the right person for the job of healing those wounds and reestablishing relationships with filmmakers might *not* have been the guy best known for shepherding the likes of *Naked and Afraid*, *Dr. Pimple Popper*, and *My 600-lb Life*. And, to be fair, figures from the world of reality TV are often seen with suspicion, if not outright snobbery, by those responsible for scripted fare. But Zaslav did himself no favors, and did little to blur that binary, when announcing the merger of the HBOMax and Discovery+ streaming services in a quarterly earnings call—which included a much-derided infographic deeming HBOMax’s scripted programming as “male skew,” “appointment viewing,” and “lean in” (?), while Discovery+’s unscripted shows were “female skew” “comfort viewing,” and thus “lean back” (?!?).

More distressingly, in that same call, Zaslav announced that two nearly completed films that had been greenlit and produced under the previous regime for streaming on HBOMax—the DC superhero story *Batgirl* and the family sequel *Scoob!: Holiday Haunt*—would not be distributed on the platform or released in theaters. Instead, they would be essentially wiped from existence and used as a tax-write down.

Eagle-eyed subscribers subsequently noted that several other Max originals, including the Seth Rogen comedy *An American Pickle* and Robert Zemeckis’s remake of *The Witches*, had been quietly removed from the service, in a further attempt to save money. The service proceeded to remove several dozen series from its library, from HBO originals like *Westworld* and *Vinyl* to family programming like *The Not-Too-Late Show with Elmo* to animated series like *Infinity Train*. Even episodes of *Sesame Street* weren’t safe. Several other streaming services, including Paramount+, Starz, Showtime, Disney+ and Hulu, have followed suit, disappearing their underperforming originals for tax purposes, creating giant swaths of shockingly recent yet bafflingly “lost” media.

Meanwhile, the merger of the HBOMax and Discovery+ services continued apace, with a bizarre rebranding to simply “Max,” consciously choosing to remove its most prestigious and identifiable piece of branding. (It was akin to Disney+ renaming itself “Plus.”) It was almost as if the reality-skewing CEO was ashamed of the streamer’s affiliation with high-quality, high-profile scripted programming—a perception further confirmed when Max launched in May.

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On the "details" tab for film and shows on the service's new interface, writers, directors, and producers, no matter how they're credited in the work in question, are lumped together (in no particular order) under the nebulous designation of "creators." (That means, for example, that according to Max, the film *Raging Bull* was "created" by Peter Savage, Martin Scorsese, Mardik Martin, Robert Chartoff, Paul Schrader, Jake La Motta, Irwin Winkler, and Joseph Carter.) A joint statement from the Director's Guild of America and the Writer's Guild of America West criticized the "unilateral decision by Warner Bros. Discovery to change the long-standing individual credits of directors and writers in the new rollout of Max." Max quickly promised to "correct the credits, which were altered due to an oversight in the technical transition from HBO Max to Max." More than a month later, the "oversight" has not been corrected.

That backlash, however, was nothing compared to what happened recently. In mid-June, Warner Bros Discovery cut loose five of the most senior executives ("the people who've been the architect of the brand for decades," according to one insider) at Turner Classic Movies, the cable network beloved among cinephiles—and high-profile filmmakers. Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, and Paul Thomas Anderson quickly released a statement, noting, "Turner Classic Movies has always been more than just a channel. It is truly a precious resource of cinema, open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And while it has never been a financial juggernaut, it has always been a profitable endeavor since its inception." And while they insisted Zaslav had assured them "that TCM and classic cinema are very important to him," subsequent reporting indicated that TCM's staff had been cut from 90 employees to a skeletal 20.

Nearly lost in the hullabaloo was yet another of the company's exhaustive attempts to squeeze a profit from its assets: a \$500 million deal to sell around half of their film and TV-music library. In a perhaps too-good-to-be-true detail, the sale would reportedly include "As Time Goes By" from *Casablanca*—the musical fanfare that plays before every Warner Bros. feature film.

Barely a month ago, Graydon Carter was hosting a party in Zaslav's honor at Cannes, all but crowning him as the heir apparent to Jack Warner. But there's a crucial difference between Zaslav and the old-school moguls he's attempting to emulate: They loved movies, and cared about filmmakers. Zaslav sees movies as "content," sees filmmakers as "content creators," and is only interested in maintaining, preserving, and presenting "content" that can make him and his stockholders a quick buck. Anything that doesn't, he'll happily gut. He's closer to Logan Roy than Jack Warner and there is a genuine, understandable fear that his bean-counting represents not just shrugging indifference but outright hostility to cinema and its rich history.

In *Pretty Woman*, Richard Gere stars as Edward Lewis, a corporate raider who buys companies “that are in financial difficulty” and sells off their pieces. “So it’s sort of like stealing cars and selling them for the parts, right?” asks call girl Vivian (Julia Roberts), when he explains what he does, and it’s hard not to think of Lewis when looking over Zaslav’s reign at Warner Bros Discovery, stepping into the distressed conglomerate and stripping it for parts.

Edward Lewis, however, is at least honest about what he does. “You don’t make anything,” Vivian notes, and he agrees; “You don’t build anything,” she continues, and he concurs with that as well. And perhaps that’s why David Zaslav is earning a concerning reputation so far. He’s out here carrying on like a mogul, but based on his performance to date, he’s only good at breaking things.

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